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Review

Untrammelled growth as an environmental “March of Folly”

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ABSTRACT

The theme we explore in this paper is that uncontrolled growth and resulting environmental damage can be considered as an Environmental March of Folly. A folly has been defined as the pursuit of policies that are contrary to the pursuers own long-term interests. For an event or series of events to be considered a folly, three criteria must be met. The policy must be perceived as counter-productive in its “own time.” A feasible alternative course of action must have been available. The policy should come from a group, not an individual leader, and should persist beyond one political lifetime. Environmental folly is uncontrolled and environmentally damaging growth that has been recognized as counter-productive; that this has been fueled by cheap fossil energies which are non-renewable; alternatives have been suggested; and the present policy based on growth of use of resources and human population has been continuous over several generations of humanity in the face of repeated warnings. We suggest ways that environmental folly can be ended.

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1. Introduction

A main characteristic of folly according to historian Barbara Tuchman is rejection of reason that involves near addictive, compulsive pursuit of the counter-productive after it has been determined to be counter-productive. In this essay we argue that our relationship with the environment, as a result of compulsive addiction to growth (including numbers of humans, resource use, and transformations of the biosphere), largely fueled by cheap fossil energy, constitutes a “March of Folly”. We discuss why it is a folly, why it persists and suggest solutions.

Barbara Tuchman, in her 1984 book, *The March of Folly* defines a folly as the pursuit by governments and/or industry (including agriculture), of policies that are contrary to their own long-term interest. For an event or series of events to be considered a folly, three criteria must be met:

- The policy must be perceived as counter-productive in its “own time.” That is, during the time period when events were occurring, the policy must have been perceived by a relatively large number of thoughtful people as being counter-productive and damaging.
- Feasible alternative courses of action must have been available.
- The policy should come from a group, not an individual leader, and should persist beyond one political lifetime. This excludes the policy of a tyrant with dictatorial powers.

Two of several examples of follies cited by Tuchman span a period of about 3000 years. The first was the Trojan War when, following nine years of warfare, the Greeks departed leaving behind at the gate of the city the famous wooden horse containing hidden soldiers. Many people within the city argued vehemently to burn the horse, or throw it into the sea, or cut

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it open. Nevertheless, the Trojans brought the wooden horse into the city, and that decision led to their doom. The defeat of Troy was not ordained by fate. The people in the city made a conscious decision to reject the alternative of destroying the horse outside the city. Today, a metaphorical horse full of our population and pollution and gobbling up the earth's natural resources (especially fossil fuels) is upon us awaiting our decision. In all follies, the choice of destroying the horse is always there.

A 20th century March of Folly was the Vietnam War. Tuchman writes that ignorance was not a major factor in Vietnam that was continued through five successive presidencies. She concluded that the folly lay not in America's pursuit of a goal in ignorance of the obstacles, but rather long-term persistence in pursuing a policy in spite of the accumulation of evidence that the goals were not attainable. The policy, long before the end of the war and in spite of the courageous and brave sacrifices of Americans and others on both sides serving in Vietnam, was recognized by many to be contrary to American interest, and damaging to American society and reputation. In the final analysis, the folly in Vietnam (and perhaps now in Iraq) is consistent with classic symptoms of folly, which are to deny evidence, to refuse to draw valid conclusions, and to become addicted to the counter-productive. Our leaders chose too late to destroy the mythical Greek horse and end the war, and that policy led to tragedy and humiliation.

2. Environmental "March of Folly"

That environmental policy in much of the world may be leading us on a March of Folly was hinted at when Tuchman asked why many insist upon "growth" when such a practice is spoiling and using up basic resources of life including land, water, energy and air, and is demonstratively not sustainable?

This essay expands upon and presents an argument that many individuals, governments as well as national and international companies that control industry, mining, energy extraction, forestry, fishing and agriculture are wedded to profit-motivated, largely unregulated principles. These growth policies are counter-productive, unsustainable and damaging to people and the ecosystems with which we share our planet. This growth is fueled by rapid utilization of limited fossil energy and nurtured by people that consistently attempt to reduce, or eliminate regulations and laws that protect the environment. Many recognize this problem and alternative solutions have been proposed, especially by individuals in the fields of ecological economics, restoration ecology, and ecological engineering. Continuation of the growth policy is the Environmental March of Folly.

At the onset of the argument that an environmental folly is happening and that an alternative exists, it is important to recognize that capitalism and democracy are not the same. In fact, democracy is necessary to insure that global, unregulated capitalism and the growth it demands does not result in further ecological damage and perhaps even the elimination of our species. The democratic system has the flexibility and power to provide control of unregulated capitalism necessary to sustain our environment now and in the future. Such control will be unpopular to many who view growth as the only

viable path to prosperity. Measures to control present unrestricted growth will be challenged and fought at every step. This results because there will be economic costs to those who exploit resources and abuse the environmental commons (air, water, soil, minerals, fossil fuels, and living things). We do not suggest that energy, minerals, land, water, air and biologic resources not be extracted or used. Humans, as with all living things, need and have the right to use Earth's resources and to enjoy our beautiful planet. However, we have the moral obligation to use resources responsibly and minimize harm to the environment. Basically, we have created a growth-oriented world economic system, which is the only game in town. In essence, we have to change the rules of the game. But the growth-based neoclassical economic system will be self-limiting because it is based on finite resources, especially fossil fuels. An important issue is how growth will slow and stop. We basically have two alternatives. We can use the Earth's resources to make the changes to a more sustainable society. Or we can use up fossil fuels and other resources in a last ditch effort to sustain current patterns of growth. The latter seems to be the path of the energy policy of much of the world. The focus, not withstanding the rapid growth of solar and wind energy, is primarily on fossil fuels with relaxation of environmental protection to allow maximum exploitation and use of those fuels at the expense of clean air and human health and foreclosing future options for sustainability.

It is also important to acknowledge that unregulated capitalism is not the sole problem. The former Soviet Union promoted growth policies that, on a per capita basis, damaged the environment to a greater extent than previous political systems. The factors responsible for environmental degradation in both systems include rapid growth in human population, industrialization, and use of natural resources all fueled by cheap energies. The Soviet government, as sole owner of the resources and committed to centralized control of industry, promoted policies resulting in environmental problems. It was very difficult to challenge government proposals for projects and resource utilization and thus even well intended programs could lead to unanticipated environmental degradation. Such programs are more likely to be terminated in a society that allows public criticism than in one that does not. Such policies continue today in the People's Republic of China, where projects with potential for serious environmental disruption continue, such as the world's largest dam and reservoir on the Yangtze River. The decision (policy), from a totalitarian system, to build the dam was from the top down. Internal criticism of the project was not appreciated and was punished or ignored.

An additional important point is that human societies have altered the environment in the past, sometimes to their own destruction, as clearly demonstrated in the book *Collapse* by Jared Diamond. The culture of Easter Island is an example of this. But early societies were limited to relatively local impacts because they were running on solar energy. The globalized super consumption, which characterizes the industrialized world today, has the additional energy source of fossil fuels. And this has allowed the human population to affect the biosphere at a global scale.

People's religious beliefs have sometimes been blamed as the cause of environmental degradation. For example, Lynn

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